

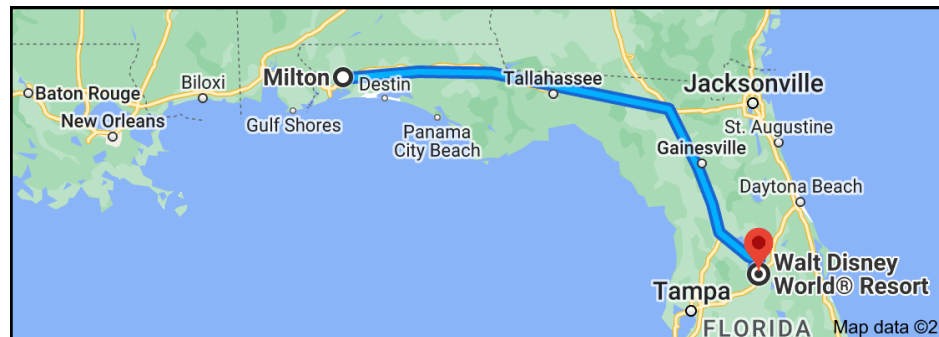
Magical Mimi Memories

Milania Bieber

Santa Rosa County ~ District 1

Have you ever heard the phrase "expect the unexpected"? Growing up in a military family, I've grown accustomed to the sentiment- or so I thought.

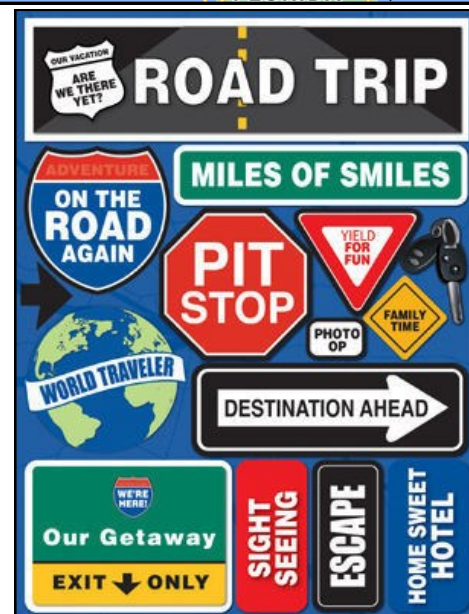
However, nothing could have prepared me for the surprise of a lifetime last spring during what I thought was a regular trip to our family farm.



For six hours the highway and sky competed for which would end first. It was puzzling, since our usual drive to Alabama finished in half the time. Pulling into a sprawling campus of lush gardens lined with windowed buildings, I knew my family was not at our farmhouse. My parents explained that we were staying at a hotel due to a leak in our home. My sisters and I buzzed excitedly at the change of scenery!

After checking in with the concierge, we hurried outside to find our accommodations. While walking, my mom pointed to a woman admiring the view. "Doesn't she look like Mimi?", Mom whispered, stopping and studying the lady.

Persisting, Mom added I should approach my grandmother's doppelganger and inform her of the similarity she shared with my mimi, who I hadn't seen in years due to our last move. My gaze lingering, the woman approached us as I watched, mortified. "SURPRISE!", my parents and the lady shouted, embracing us. Standing hostage in a hug, the realization that this was MY mimi washed over me. "You came to Alabama!", we yelled, squeezing her. Now Mimi looked bewildered. Chuckling, my parents revealed their last surprise, "We aren't in Alabama. We're at Disney World!"



The next week was a whirlwind of colorful sights and endless laughter. Even so, I had incredible experiences with Mimi that lodged lasting memories. I'll always remember riding the Seven Dwarfs Mine Train with her. Nervously boarding the roller coaster, Mimi squeezed my hand until my fingertips turned white. While the cart teetered around sharp curves and plummeted down unexpected descents, Mimi's shrieks pierced the air. Despite my adrenaline coursing I laughed. This screaming, frazzled Mimi was a

stark difference from my former memories of her as a dignified woman imparting justice and wisdom from her courtroom bench.

The end of our Disney World vacation was bittersweet. Thoughts of tearful goodbyes with Mimi loomed, but she ensured the finale of our trip would be unforgettable. My family gathered at "Chef Mickey's" to enjoy breakfast together before departing. The electrifying atmosphere of the restaurant was a welcome distraction from the melancholy weighing on us. Frowns became smiles as Mickey and his pals bounced to each table carrying a smorgasbord of food. Towering stacks of pancakes topped with whipped cream, crispy bacon strips still sizzling, the train of tantalizing treats seemed never ending. Between savory mouthfuls, we struck poses for photos with our famous friends. I'll never forget Pluto planting a kiss on Mimi's cheek!



My unexpected trip with Mimi at Disney World was an adventure of a lifetime. The time we spent together created memories I cherish as my family is separated by hundreds of miles. As my mom always says, "Sometimes life's greatest surprises come from the most unexpected places."

A Special Place in My Heart for Mrs. Joanne Haskel

Gracie Tan

Palm Beach County ~ District 10

My heart holds a special place for Mrs. Joanne Haskel. She was the wife of Mr. Jon Haskel, our Chess tournament Director for The Boca Chess Club. Her passing four months ago left a void, and her absence put a hole in my heart. She was 69 years old. The memories we shared are special, and I will always treasure them.

Mrs. Joanne was more than just a person helping out her husband at the Chess tournaments, she encouraged me to take on Chess 5 years ago. Despite her busy schedule, she always found time to support Mr. Haskel, who spent many weekends hosting Scholastics Chess tournaments and also

found time to encourage students like me in Chess. Her passion for the game and her smile were contagious.

I first met Mrs. Joanne when I was six years old while reluctantly tagging along with my siblings to the tournaments. At that time, I would play outside or sit quietly in the hallways. One day, Mrs. Joanne noticed me and invited me to sit with her inside the tournament room while she helped record scores from the players. She would talk to me in between breaks and ask me to help with a few things. We enjoyed each other companies as each Chess tournament usually lasted 5 hours long. As months went by, she would explain the game's rules in the simplest terms. Other times, she asked me to help set up and put away extra chess boards.

One day, she told me a story about how she helped her son get started and eventually compete at the Nationals. She suggested I could also play Chess and said I was young enough to start learning.

It was Mrs. Joanne who sparked my interest in Chess. She shared stories about her son's journey in Chess, from local tournaments to national championships, and she believed I could achieve the same. Her encouragement and belief in my potential gave me confidence.

One day, as I became more involved in Chess, she sent me a Boca Chess T-shirt in the mail, this was a sweet sign of her confidence in my abilities and a reminder to continue practicing Chess every day. I felt so proud while wearing the shirt.

Mrs. Joanne passed away unexpectedly a few months ago. Her passing left me sad, like a part of my heart had been taken away. I miss her warm smile. The other day, I looked for her at the most recent Chess tournament in Ft. Lauderdale. It is not the same without her, but I am always thankful to her for motivating me to play Chess. Thank you, Mrs. Joanne, for everything you did for me! I hope you are doing well in heaven!



Christmas at Jo's

Cooper Williams

Sumter County



As a kid, did you ever have that special event that you looked forward to every year? If you ask kids my age, some may say the county fair. Others may say the annual Fall Festival, but my favorite by far is Christmas Eve at my Great-Grandma Jo's house! My great grandma has three sons, four grandkids, and seven great grandkids in her family. Every year on Christmas Eve our family meets at Grandma Jo's house. It is the one time of year that we all get together, and one that none of us want to miss. Grandma Jo always makes Christmas Eve the most special time for our family to be together.

Grandma Jo spends a full week decorating her house for Christmas. She wraps each limb of her Christmas tree with lights then covers every inch of it with red balls, flowers, and bows! Every room in her house gets a Christmas makeover. From the door mats to the dinner china everything makes the spirit of Christmas shine through. She has arts and crafts that my Papa, and my dad made when they were little, and now she has artwork from me too. The outside walkways are lined with Christmas lights, and the moment we pull into her driveway I get so excited because it is so beautiful!

Another reason Christmas at Grandma Jo's is special is her dessert table! Grandma Jo loves to bake. She starts about four days ahead to make sure she bakes everyone's favorite. Mine is her sugar cookies with homemade icing! She makes my mom divinity, and Uncle Kenny gets a 14-layer caramel cake! Fudge is always on the table as well as red velvet cake. She puts so much time into making each one- it is her way of showing love! The best part is that whatever is not eaten goes home with us.

Once everyone is full of sweets, we move to the tree to open presents. Grandma Jo starts shopping months ahead, making sure she finds exactly what we each want. She passes out the gifts to us. Once everyone has their gifts, she watches us open our presents. Sometimes if the gift is too big to wrap, she will make a scavenger hunt to find your present! Her favorite part is watching our reactions. Once we have opened our gifts, we always gather around to watch her open her own gifts. She is always thankful for everything she gets.

After we clean up and pack away our gifts, we sit and talk together. Grandma Jo won't let anyone help wash her dishes. She wants everyone to relax and enjoy our time together. I know she must be tired after all the work she puts into our time together, but I have never heard her complain about it. She just loves having her family together. She makes Christmas special, and it is something I will always be grateful for. Grandma Jo is very special, and I will always remember Christmas at Jo's.

